

In our home the boys definitely have more control of the TV remote than the girls, and very often when it comes to sitting down in front of the TV, it will be directed towards Sci Fi movies, or adventure movies, and then there's all the football that we watch. Alison does sneak in the odd romantic comedy or the American drama programmes, but it definitely is a boy's house. And I've noticed that our Nathan loves adventure movies – in particular JR Tolkien's the Lord of the Rings trilogy is a big thing for him, or watching the Hobbit. He could watch them again and again. But if you know Lord of the Rings, the main character is a hobbit called Frodo Baggins and he's given an incredibly dangerous task to rid the world of the Ring of power. He has a deep friendship with a wizard called Gandalf, and in one of the movies with the sheer burden that is on him, he says this to Gandalf, "I wish this need not have happened in my time,". "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

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I wonder this morning have you realised that you and I have a purpose in this time we are in, and so what do we decide to do with the time we have? Do we grab it, or do we just not bother?

Last week we began our series on the book of Nehemiah, and in chapter 1 we saw how Nehemiah's heart was so full of desperation for what he saw in the destroyed city of Jerusalem that it brought him to tears and also to prayer. And this week we are going to see how this desperation brought him into action rather than feeling defeated. Like Frodo we may look around and think to ourselves, I wish this wasn't my time, life is really difficult. But I believe that God has us here for this time, and for the purposes of rebuilding. We have all got to seize the time we are in right now as Christians, we can't wait for those that are coming after us to do what we should be doing right now as witnesses of God's love to a broken community.

I was reminded further of this last week. All the hedges around the garden have been full of berries, and it was my plan to pick them and make some jam. However with church commitments and other things, I never got round to pick them. On Friday I remembered and went out to start, to find that it was too late. Many were eaten by the birds, many had gone hard. The moment had passed.

We all know from COVID that life is fragile and therefore we must take the opportunity now while it is with us, because we don't know what's round the corner do we?

Remember - All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

I don't think any of us will forget the Euro 2020 football when Denmark were playing Finland, and suddenly during the game, Denmark's player Christian Eriksen collapsed to the ground. The stadium fell silent, people were crying, the players formed a ring around him, and some commentators said it was one of those moments when many across the world stopped and prayed for a miracle to occur. It was a moment where many saw what the power of prayer could do.

And in the same way we see this ordinary guy Nehemiah, knowing that before he does anything further regarding the walls, he needs to start in prayer. Before he can respond to

the questions facing him from the King, verse 4 says that he prayed to the God of heaven. Chapter 1 is set in the context of prayer. Nehemiah realises that for the moment that he is in, he needs to come before the Lord. He knows that prayer works. His desperation provokes prayer instead of panic.

So today we are going to look at what this position of humility and prayer in Chapter 1 drives Nehemiah to do next. As Chapter 2 unfolds, he seizes the moment that he is in, and so we are going to look at 3 things :

Verse 1-9 Nehemiah responds in faith

Verse 10-17 He steps out

Verse 18-20 He speaks out

You can imagine how difficult it would have been for Nehemiah to disguise his feelings. He was deeply heartbroken over his city, he knew there was something needing done and yet he is in exile. And so the King noticed his demeanour and says *“Why does your face look sad when you are not ill. This can be nothing but sadness of heart”*. Nehemiah now has to respond – and remember this is the powerful Artaxerxes – with one command Nehemiah could be dead if he doesn’t reply. But his faith in the Lord convicts him to seize this moment. Look at verse 2b *‘I was very much afraid, BUT I said to the King’*.

I think we all need to take this onboard in our own lives in how we should response in faith, because Nehemiah could have said, *“I’m not even meant to be here. I should be still in Jerusalem. This isn’t even my home”*. Instead he responded in faith – he didn’t shy away or come up with excuses. He knew this was his moment, even though it may not have been ideal. It wasn’t about waiting for all the ducks to be lined up in a row, he needed to just go. And for some here today, you might be thinking the same way, you might be thinking that things weren’t meant to be like this. You might be saying, *I wasn’t meant to be a single mum trying to make ends meet, I wasn’t meant to have these burdens. Wherever we are, we might in life be thinking why am I here, why do I feel so displaced? There is no hope for me. But hear Nehemiah’s statement, “I was very much afraid, BUT”*. And so God is saying to you today, wherever you are right now, however tough it is, there is a purpose behind it where God is able to shine. You might be very afraid, BUT walk in faith knowing that God has you in this moment to shine for him. As we have sat in this place of national mourning over the past week, I truly believe that God has used this to tell millions about his love. Even through the death and sadness of a very old lady, we have seen hope, and so instead of Churches up and down the country doing nothing, we have seen a great wave of opportunities for the church to bare witness to the living hope in Jesus. So for all of us, in the many situations we face in life, respond to what God wants to do in them and through you. You might be afraid, BUT God has a plan.

And so Nehemiah from verse 4 provides the King with a list of what he needs. It’s rather brave of him to demand so much, and yet even in that place of fear, he knows that this moment must be grabbed. Nehemiah is living with a boldness in the knowledge that God is bigger than the issues that he is facing. He knows that God is going to change the very heart of the King.

And so Nehemiah gets what he wants, and he steps out (which is our second point). He travels and the King’s letters ensure him safe passage, he is protected by the King’s army as

he goes, and he receives all the provisions that he needs. Have you ever considered just how incredible that is. Artaxerxes is the most powerful King in the entire ancient world, and yet in the hands of God he becomes an enabler for Nehemiah to go and begin the work of rebuilding. Folks, never consider that the mountain that might look massive in front of you is too difficult to move. Anything is possible when God's hand is on it, and so whatever the situation you face in life, no matter how frightening – seek the Lord in prayer for it, don't step away from the moment, seize it and step out in faith.

So Nehemiah is now in Jerusalem and he's examining the state of the walls. He knows that the task ahead is enormous and they start the job of rebuilding. The people gather to rebuild, and there's a momentum to it. And for us as a church, coming through a difficult period over recent years, I long for a new spiritual momentum to us as we think into the future. Maybe a better way of saying it my desire to see a spiritual awakening or revival. I know on a number of times now I have talked about this RESET taking place right now; this need to come back to a place of worship, of intimacy, of prayer, of devotion, making all these our priorities before we start getting so busy with all the programmes. And I know that this is going to take time, I realise that. And it's going to take time because it's not easy to change the current momentum of any church that has been around for over 100 years. I am looking to rebuild the church for a stronger future, not just to kind of put the bricks back in place and hope it sustains any future attack. Rebuilding and Resetting in a different way is not the easy approach – it requires much more effort. If any of this was easy then we'd see our prayer gatherings growing beyond the same 10-15 that have met since I came here 6 years ago, I'd see all of you committing to weekly small groups, and the truth is we're not seeing it. Yes we're starting to see Sunday worship building again and that's good. We're seeing all the organisations starting up again, but the task of RESET is going to take time. So if it's so difficult why do I keep going on about it? Well it's because it is in my heart that all of you would discover a deeper relationship with God in your life – without this we will never truly move on to better things. Nehemiah stepped out in faith and he called on the people to rebuild. I know it's a brave move to make because I know that many in traditional churches just want to keep the hamster wheel turning week after week, going through the weekly pattern of Sunday gatherings and that's all, but I know deep in my heart that God wants more of your time with him, more of your devotion, and I know this because that desperation is not diminishing from my heart. I truly believe that God is calling us to rebuild our church in a different way – one that will sustain us for generations to come.

So change like this is not going to be easy, but I truly believe we are in a moment worth seizing. But just as we come to the end of our reading today, it would be wrong of me to not notice that it ends with opposition. Let me read verse 17b to the end.

[The people] replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

²⁰ I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

Now I realise I have to be careful how I respond to what we have read from God's word. But I know that some might say, well I don't agree with that approach, with this idea of RESET. I want to just come Sunday by Sunday, I don't want to engage in any more aspects of worship and devotion. I give to the church. What more do you want?

All I would say is remember what Nehemiah did. Yes it was frightening to look ahead to rebuilding the walls. He could have sat in the relative comfort of Babylon and forgot his past, but he was convicted by the Holy Spirit to respond. (Remember there's that word in verse 3 - BUT) He was frightened BUT he wasn't willing to just sit back. He knew that every person had a part to play, and his part was as important as everyone else's. Folks, the church is the body and it is made up of all parts. Therefore not one of us is exempt for its function. I'd love as we release the RESET document to you all very soon that you would respond with a resounding YES. I'd love it if many who have become so used to sitting at home and watching the service would wherever possible return back, I'd love for everyone to commit to re-evaluating your daily life towards devotion, worship and service. I'd love it if we could see our 8 small groups filled. I'd love it if like the people around Nehemiah, were to actively make it their purpose to say "Yes, let us start rebuilding for the future. In the power and strength of God Almighty, count me in".

So why was the rebuilding of the walls so important and why is rebuilding differently so important for us? Well within the walls was the temple of the Lord, the place where God's presence dwelt. Nehemiah realised that the rebuilding of the walls was so important for the future of God's people. Without that spiritual focus, the people would drift. Nehemiah did not shy away from the task ahead because he knew what was at stake. His desperation for the return and restoration of God's people, united again in worship to the living God was his motivation. As your pastor and teacher I believe RESET is all about the restoration of our church post pandemic, but built in a different way with a deeper focus on devotion, and this will sustain us for generations to come. Our society is driving people further away from a devotion to God, but we must resist it and draw closer.

May God by his Spirit direct each one of us in the weeks to come to step out in faith with a renewed purpose. What could this look like – well it could be committing to a new small group, it could be to commit to a more regular pattern of Sunday worship, it could be an act of serving in some way. Do not let the moment pass; seize it. Let's not ignore this moment – let's not sit back and let others get on with it. Remember what Gandalf said to Frodo, "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us". Let's respond in faith, let's step out in this new season as a church.

Let's pray

Lord we are very aware that you alone know where you would want us in this moment. We choose today to actually take this moment and not ignore it. Forgive us if all we have been is spectators up until now. Forgive us if we fear change. Walk before us as we come in closer devotion to your will for our lives. We pray this seeking the strength of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.